

## WESLEY DAY, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016. Rev Stuart Grant. Levin Uniting Church

It was the worst winter ever in London. Snow had been falling off and on for almost the entire week. The temperatures had remained below freezing and the pollution from open coal fires was suffocating. Along a cobblestone street in one of London's better neighbourhoods, a short thin figure wrapped in a black cloak for warmth went from door to door seeking donations to support the Methodist work among the poor. He was a striking figure with brilliant blue eyes, long white hair and fine delicate hands. His name was the Rev. John Wesley.

At the time he was one of the most prominent people in England and one of the best read. The month was January, the year was 1785. Wesley was 82 years old at the time.

I quote this rather moving passage from a book by Dr. Jim Stuart, a Wesley scholar who lives in Christchurch. He published his book, "The John Wesley Code" a few years ago.

Jim Stuart's description of Wesley trudging the streets as an old man gives us a picture of a driven man.

Of those days in a wintry, snowy London, Wesley wrote in his journal:

"At this season we usually distribute coals and bread among the poor of the society. But now I considered they want clothes as well as food. So on this, and the four following days, I walked the streets and begged two hundred pounds, in order to clothe them that needed it most. But it was hard work, as most of the streets were filled with melting snow,.. so that my feet were steeped in snow-water from morning till night."

Now let's go back in time to the beginning of John Wesley's life, to the story of the house fire. Wesley always looked back on that terrifying incident as an act of Providence. He considered himself "A brand plucked from the burning", and that he had been spared for a purpose.

Many years passed before he discovered what that purpose was. He was the son and grandson of Anglican clergymen. He was well connected – not an aristocrat, but in receipt of aristocratic patronage, which led to his being educated at Charterhouse School and Oxford University.

While at Lincoln College, he and his brother Charles and other students committed themselves to diligently studying the bible, praying together, visiting the sick, the poor and prisoners. Fellow students mockingly called them "Methodists". The nickname stuck.

In 1735 the two brothers sailed to the new American colony of Georgia. The venture was a disaster. John would look back on that time as one when he was driven by a legalistic approach to the Christian faith. Everything had to be done properly and in order. The needs and feelings of people took a rather second place to right doctrine. There wasn't much love in it. "I went to America to convert the Indians," he wrote later, "But who should convert me?"

To cut a long story short, after arousing the anger of the colonial authorities, John and Charles fled back to London, where they arrived at an all-time low in their lives. John saw himself as an utter failure. He was searching for a deeper faith that he knew existed, but he did not yet have.

In this state of mind, on 24 May 1738, in the evening, he went unwillingly to a house in Aldersgate Street, where he heard someone read from Luther's commentary of the Letter to the Romans. Wesley wrote in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation . . ."

It was like a dam bursting. From then on Wesley was driven, not by orthodox faith and right doctrine, but by love. And all his considerable powers were taken over and guided by that love, - love of God and love of people. He was a highly educated scholar, - regarded as one of the best read men in England, - he was a persuasive preacher and teacher, - and above all an organiser.

He could have had a comfortable life as a university lecturer. Instead, he chose to go out among the poor of the new industrial towns, among the coal miners of Newcastle and the tin miners of Cornwall, bringing them the good news of the unconditional love of God. And they came in their hundreds and thousands to hear him preach in the open air. As Jim Stuart puts it in his book:

“. . . to miners, mill workers and factory workers who worked from sun up to sun down, to the poor trapped not only in the poverty of their class but also in a poverty of spirit – the words of God’s grace being free in all and for all must have struck the notes of forgiveness, healing and freedom in their ears for the first time.”

Gradually, Methodist societies grew up all around the United Kingdom. People who had never heard the Gospel were changed by its influence. A band of travelling preachers was established to help spread the word. Some Anglican clergy supported Wesley, but many did not, and he was banned from many churches on account of his “enthusiasm”. To bring spiritual hope to the masses was regarded as just as dangerous as to educate them. The Bishop of Bristol said to him: “Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing; yes, sir, it is a very horrid thing. Sir, you have no business here.”

Wesley took no notice of that. He said, “The whole world is my parish.” And he spent the next 40 years of his life travelling around England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland on horseback, - in later years by coach, - preaching and looking after the Methodist Societies. In some places his preaching caused riots, as at Wednesbury, but that did not deter him.

Wesley never left the Anglican church. He saw the Methodists as a kind of church within a church that had largely turned away from basic Christianity. He always insisted that Methodist meetings should never be at the same time as Anglican church services. But by the time of Wesley’s death in 1791 it was clear that a split from the established church was inevitable.

Many of the Methodist leaders had come to faith from outside the church and felt no loyalty to it. In the United States, Methodism spread rapidly, as it did within a short time, to other parts of the world, including our own. The first Methodist missionary came to the far north of New Zealand in 1822.

But let’s go back to Wesley himself. Think of the little boy saved from the flames of the burning parsonage, the “brand plucked from the burning.” Think of the prim and proper clergyman and his experience of the “warmed heart”.

It was these things that gave him a sense that he had been placed on this earth for a purpose. And his band of preachers were united in the same belief, - that their mission was to be ambassadors of Christ to a deeply troubled society.

Of course, all this is history. We’re talking about people and events of 250 years ago and more. So what about today? Jim Stuart has some challenging words:

“Methodists have for the most part lost this sense of purpose and mission . . . it remains a dimly lit candle that needs some fresh air to burn brightly once again.”

We might ask, “Is Methodism all that important? Surely it doesn’t matter all that much which branch of the Christian family you belong to. They all point in the same direction.”

True. But I think the Methodist tradition has certain characteristics, certain emphases, which it brings to the whole church, just as the Presbyterians and the Anglicans and other branches of the Christian family have theirs. While we must always look to the needs of the present, we would lose some great treasures if we ignore our history, as indeed it has been ignored.

This is the conclusion Jim Stuart comes to in his book, and I want to give you a summary of the particular characteristics he identifies in respect of Methodism. There are four of them.

First comes THE WARMED HEART. For Wesley, as we've heard, that came from his experience at Aldersgate Street. Instead of a religion of duty and fear, he now had a religion based on the unconditional love of God.

It was that unconditional love that drove him for the rest of his days, throughout all the persecutions and difficulties that lay ahead of him. If there is one thing we need to be doing and living out in our lives as Christian people, it is this same unconditional love. At a time when the very idea of God is under attack by many people, or people are completely indifferent to faith, it may be hard to do this. But we need to call on our personal spiritual experience, nurture it and trust it.

Second comes an OPEN MIND. Wesley wrote and published many sermons. The most quoted one these days has the title, "The catholic spirit." (Catholic in the sense of "universal", with a small "c").

Here's a quote from it:

"Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and he will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?"

Now this was pretty radical stuff for the time. The emphasis in Wesley's time, and since the Reformation, was on right belief. Faith was a set of doctrines which you agreed with, and if you didn't, you might end up in trouble with the church. The important thing is that if we have an open mind, we will be protected from the kind of blind faith that simply accepts certain opinions and prevents us from thinking for ourselves.

Closely allied with an OPEN MIND is the third characteristic, and that is A CATHOLIC SPIRIT. What Wesley meant by that is that no one has a monopoly on truth, and that people would always disagree about all sorts of things. But, he said, when Christians disagreed with each other, they should do so IN LOVE. For Wesley, a catholic spirit meant that "while we all cannot think alike, we can all love alike."

If you experienced the love of God in a warmed heart, then it followed that you would show love for others. There's a lot for us to bear in mind here, as we consider our relationships to our fellow Christians in other branches of the church family, and followers of the other great religions.

The last of the four points is A WHOLE GOSPEL.

Wesley had no time for complicated expressions of the Christian faith. He wanted above all to teach the essentials of the faith in such a way that it became "plain truth for plain people." he saw the dangers of mere formal, superficial religion. True religion, for Wesley, began continued and finished with the warmed heart.

He considered that a gospel minister “in the full scriptural sense of the word, was one of whatever denomination who declared the whole counsel of God . . . The whole Gospel . . . that is, Christ dying for us, and Christ living in us.”

So, that’s a very brief and inadequate summary of the Methodist heritage. But we would have to say that Methodists in general have not been very good stewards of that heritage. Jim Stuart would say that we’ve ignored, even thrown out, a lot of the valuable things of Methodism’s past, and that a whole Gospel is hard to find among today’s Methodists. In this highly technological and secular age, we would do well to look towards our roots and rediscover the riches they hold, - not just out of nostalgia or some romantic notion of the “good old days” (no such thing!), nor because we want to beat a denominational drum, but simply because there ARE many riches to be mined and put into practice from the teachings of John Wesley.

I’ll close with two quotes from the man himself:

“For this is the whole end of one’s life, one’s whole business, one’s whole happiness. in this our infant state we cannot know much, but we may love much. Let us secure this point, and we shall be swallowed up in an ocean both of knowledge and of love.”

And Wesley’s own last words: “The best of all is, God is with us.”